

By GUS M. BILIRAKIS

This week, I participated in a hearing to examine the health and safety risks our first responders face as they respond to and assist in the recovery from catastrophic incidents.

Our nation depends on these heroes - those who put their lives on the line to save others - to protect us during times of great crisis and chaos. The question I think we all must ask ourselves is: who is protecting them?

I believe that first responder safety is a collective responsibility, and that our job in Congress should be to provide the necessary resources to, and demand accountability from, the many federal, state, and local agencies that receive those funds.

We must guarantee that first responders at all levels receive the training, equipment, and guidance they need protect themselves as fully as possible. And we must ensure that they receive the necessary treatment and monitoring after response and recovery efforts have ceased.

Our nation's first responders don't fail us. We should not fail them.

We can and should do better by our first responders, especially those who courageously participated in the rescue and recovery from the tragic events of our nation's darkest day.

The health consequences that have continued to plague response and recovery workers in the years since 9/11 make it even more critical that we accelerate our safety and health preparedness efforts to prevent history from repeating itself.

The efforts to monitor and treat the health effects of those who responded on 9/11 will help both those who responded to those attacks and those responding to future disasters.

Since major disasters demand a multi-agency response, I believe there must be a common understanding of the needs and roles of the different agencies in safety management to successfully protect first responders.

I am pleased that Congress has made past progress in this area and that important steps have been taken since 9/11 to improve responder safety management.

Although many plans seem to be in place, it will be critical in preparing for future disasters to ensure that those plans can be implemented as effectively as possible.

While the health and safety risks to emergency responders can never be eliminated, those risks can be minimized to protect our nation's first responders to the greatest possible extent.